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ABSTRACT

The traditional approach to English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) curriculum development, which combines cognitivist and behaviorist approaches, reflects ideology that teachers often fail to recognize. ESL composition teachers should act not as guardians of "correct" English but as cultural or ideological critics. ESL students need to be taught that even the most seemingly innocent discourse is actually aimed at gaining student adherence to the values of the culture's dominant ideology. This approach, termed the rhetoric of accommodation, fails to challenge or change the discourse communities not in the student's or society's best interest. Pedagogy informed by the rhetoric of resistance, such as process approaches using free writing, looping, or journal keeping, fail to realize that the self is a social construct. If members of the ESL community are to be more than second class citizens in academe, the strategies of cultural criticism must be put to use to examine the ideological forces at work in current pedagogy and institutions. (MSE)

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Cultural Criticism and ESL Composition

All of us, whether as classroom teachers, program directors, or members of textbook selection committees, have to make choices about which of the current pedagogical methods in ESL Composition will inform the development of our curricula, syllabi, and actual classroom practices. Almost every day we are forced to ask whether we should opt for one of the process, functional/notional, English for special purposes, or other approaches to ESL Composition. Do we choose a cognitivist orientation, approaching writing as an act of problem-solving, or do we let our colleagues in the History Department with their complaints about how we haven't taught their students to produce coherent, grammatical sentences push us into a controlled comp. or current traditional approach?

Confronted with such a decision, most of us end up with an eclectic hodgepodge of strategies drawn from a number of different pedagogies because we feel compelled to try to satisfy all the various exigencies of our institutional sites. We choose a textbook which utilizes a process approach based on cognitivist theories of problem-solving in order to teach students goal-oriented thinking strategies because we feel the need to prepare students for careers in business and industry. And yet, because the administration has a propensity for giving our students TOEFL's, GRE's, and other so-called measures of language proficiency, we are then compelled to supplement our textbook with grammar handbooks, handouts, and exercises which are imbricated in behaviorist theories of language learning. Thus, we end up with a curriculum plagued by the theoretical incompatibility of cognitivism and behaviorism.

From the perspective of a cultural critic, there are two problems with this traditional approach to ESL curriculum development. First, there is the failure to recognize that our pedagogical choices are imbricated in our institutional situations and are therefore ideologically

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charged. Second, as Jim Berlin has pointed out in a recent *College English* article, there is a tendency among academics to ignore the relationship between ideology and pedagogical practices. We believe that this failure to recognize the ideological forces at work in our institutional sites and our pedagogies has allowed ESL Composition teachers to be cast as language police, or as guardians of "correct" English. By telling ourselves that the choices we make between pedagogies are based on objective, scientific, rational grounds rather than political or ideological ones, we have promoted our own disempowerment, allowing those larger government or academic institutions to determine the pedagogies we will choose and develop, allowing a Bill Bennett or the Historian down the hall to tell us what is right, necessary, and good in our classrooms.

We would argue that we in the field of ESL Composition should recast ourselves, not as gatekeepers or as the guardians of "correct" English, as we have so often been cast, but, rather, as practitioners of cultural or ideological criticism. If we truly wish to enable our students to become functional, autonomous members of English speaking communities, able to make decisions in the best interests of themselves and those communities, we can no longer afford to allow what Adorno called the "culture industry" to control our pedagogy. We must teach students a means of identifying and choosing between competing ideologies; we must prepare them for the demands and pressures placed on them as a result of the rhetoricity of language. ESL students need to be taught that even the most seemingly innocent of discourses has designs on them, that texts which only claim to report the "facts" are, as Perelman noted, actually aimed at gaining the students' adherence to the values of the culture's dominant ideology.

We believe that the first step in this reconstitution of the field of ESL Composition should begin with the, by now familiar, observation that subjectivity is a social construction mediated by language. As both the structuralist and post-structuralist projects have made clear, self-identity is encoded in language or, to put this in Heideggerian terms, "language speaks man." Rather than positing a transcendant self as the source of universal truths against which all experience is tested, this view sees subjectivity as a process instead of an entity. Thus, there is

never an act of pure perception; experience is always an interpretation mediated through language. We are all born into a language which preexists us, and are therefore historically and ideologically situated.

This view of the self as a social construct leads to the second point that needs to be considered in the reconstitution of ESL Composition: all claims for objectivity become ideologically saturated since there is no longer a direct connection between the experience an individual has and the meaning he or she attributes to that experience. Instead, the meaning of an experience is framed by the semiotic codes or discursive practices which precede the subject's entrance into language. And, as Foucault has so often pointed out, these codes and discursive practices are imbricated in the competing ideologies of a culture. Thus, the term "ideology" as we are using it here must be differentiated from it's Marxist meaning of "false consciousness." For us, implicit in the term "ideology" is the recognition that there is no privileged position from which one can view the world, there is no epistemological frame which will allow one to suture or to provide a complete account of experience.

The upshot of this definition of "ideology" then is that Reality, Knowledge, and Truth are all caught up in the vortex of a culture's competing ideologies. As Jim Berlin notes in the introduction to his book *Rhetoric and Reality*, (quote) "all truths arise out of dialectic, out of the interaction of individuals within discourse communities. Truth is never simply 'out there' in the material world or the social realm," nor is it "simply 'in here' in a private and personal world" (*Rhetoric and Reality* 16-7). Truth, reality, and knowledge are always creations of an individual's particular historical moment; they are, in effect, what our communities say they are. Reality is thus a matter of semiotics rather than the discovery of a universal law of nature out there or some timeless truth in the subject.

Now, if it is the case that reality is what our community says it is, then *we must say* if we are to have a voice as citizens of a participatory democracy. And, in fact, when we choose a textbook or borrow a pedagogical approach for our curricula, syllabi, or daily classroom practices, we are saying what we believe is real. Consciously or not, when we choose a pedagogy,

we buy into that pedagogy's definition of what can be accepted as real, of what can and cannot be said, of what is right and necessary and good.

Pedagogies are based on theories of language and Rhetoric and, as such, they express a relationship between language and reality by giving an account of how reality can be represented through language. Thus, pedagogies are ultimately informed by an epistemological stance, and it is this epistemological stance from which the pedagogy derives its power. Power, in this context, being the ability to state what is real since those who control what is real control what can be expressed in language, what evidence can be used to support one's claims, and what methods can be used to uncover that evidence.

From our point of view then, the choice of which pedagogy will inform our classroom practices must take into account the epistemology upon which the pedagogy is based and the ideological implications which flow from that epistemology.

When we look at the current pedagogical approaches in ESL Composition and their underlying epistemologies, they basically fall into two types: the first of these we would call "rhetorics of resistance" and the second "rhetorics of accommodation."

In general, rhetorics of resistance make the self the locus of knowledge and truth. Proponents of this view typically set up a binary between social values and expectations and human truths as revealed through the self. The goals of these pedagogies are the student's self-actualization and the recovery of the student's true voice from its oppression under a corrupt social order. Thus, a sovereign self is seen as the agency of social change and the site of the universal truths of human nature. Social practices are tested against the revealed truths of the self and are rejected or changed in order to produce a more humane and liberal society.

Pedagogies based on rhetorics of resistance typically employ brainstorming, freewriting, looping, or journal keeping as invention strategies because these techniques put the individual in touch with the self by releasing the student from the social pressures imposed by formal constraints and audience considerations. Indeed, Peter Elbow has gone so far as to argue that writers should close their eyes as they write in (quote) "an instinctive attempt to blot out [an]

awareness of audience," (*College English, 49,* p. 50) since, from his point of view, the awareness of audience and one's situation within a social context corrupts and inhibits the true voice of the self.

From our perspective, the problem with making a transcendent self the site of social change and the problem with using strategies such as freewriting in order to screen out social forces is that these approaches fail to recognize that the self is a social construct. When we ask students to listen to their private, inner voices through looping, freewriting, journal keeping, or closing their eyes, we are really asking them to listen to the voices of their culture. What students hear are the values and expectations of the discourse community into which they've been socialized. Thus, rather than expressing the voice of universal human values through a transparent language, students give us the particular ideology and social cliches they were supposed to critique in the first place. Rather than resisting the social order, they reflect it.

This reflection of the values and expectations of the discourse community in students' writing also has serious implications for the way we evaluate students' texts. What are we telling students when we reject their writing after we have asked them to express their inner voices? Aren't we telling them they are failures as human beings? Aren't we setting ourselves up as gatekeepers of the social order which we ourselves have been socialized into?

Consider what happens when we give an assignment exploring male and female gender roles such as those used in Ann Raimes' textbook *Exploring Through Writing.* And we should note here that we don't want to vilify Raimes; it's just that we chose to use this textbook in our program and, thus, know its limitations better than any other in the field. In the "Materials" section of her textbook, Raimes asks questions about photographs which are supposed to stimulate the students' thinking. Students are asked to freewrite and then produce an essay about such questions as: "What jobs do women do now that men used to do almost exclusively?" and "Has the work role of women changed recently in your country?" The obvious agenda behind these questions, which the politically adept students will pick up, is that they should write a critique of the social oppression of women. But what do we do with the student who takes the

position that women shouldn't be teachers because that places women in positions of authority over male students? I suspect that many of us would do what I have to admit that I have done in this situation -- find as many grammatical errors as it takes to fail the paper and suggest to the student that he or she should consider the effect such a view would have on some readers. However, I think we all recognize that this is a cop-out. What we are really saying to the student when we take the view that the self is not a social construct is that the student is inadequate as a person.

This sort of problem, along with the recognition that, when we read student texts, we are evaluating the students' ability to demonstrate their socialization into a particular discourse community, has led to the development of what we are calling "rhetorics of accommodation."

Pedagogies based on rhetorics of accommodation recognize that discourse communities have their own epistemologies, methods of argumentation, theories of what constitutes valid evidence, and methods for discovering that evidence. The goals of this pedagogy are to socialize students into discourse communities, to teach them to write in the language of the discipline, and to accommodate the audience, since the failure to demonstrate one's adherence to the values of the discourse community is to be silenced or, in Perelman's terms, to be disqualified as recalcitrant.

Unlike rhetorics of resistance, rhetorics of accommodation tend to be politically conservative. Agencies of change are unnecessary since no attempt is made to change the discourse community, or, at least as far as the EAP and FSP pedagogies are concerned, the socialization process stops once the student has gained access to the discourse community.

From the point of view of cultural criticism, this approach to the teaching of writing once again places the teacher in the role of gatekeeper because it says to the student "you have to demonstrate your proficiency with the language of the community in order to get past me." More importantly, however, this approach maintains the status quo and traps the student in a vicious hermeneutic circle. Changing corrupt and oppressive discursive practices from the outside of a discourse community is impossible since, as we have already observed, the failure to

speak the language of the discipline leads to silence and disqualification. Furthermore, once one has achieved membership within the discourse community, change is also impossible, since, in order to attack the community's epistemological bases and rules for valid forms of argument and evidence, you have to use the same forms of argument and evidence you sought to change in the first place. Thus, rhetorics of accommodation, while they do empower students by giving them a voice in their disciplines, nevertheless, fail to challenge or change those discourse communities that are not in the student's or the society's own best interests.

In conclusion, then, we have tried to show that the choice of which current pedagogy will inform our teaching is never an innocent one. Controlled Composition, EAP, ESP or any other pedagogical approach informed by rhetorics of accommodation commit us to a conservative political agenda. On the other hand, pedagogies informed by rhetorics of resistance, such as process approaches which use freewriting, looping, or journal keeping, fail to realize that the self is a social construct. We believe that if we, as members of the ESL community, wish to be more than second class citizens at our institutions, if we wish to have a voice in the role we will play as citizens of a participatory democracy, then we need to begin to use the strategies of cultural criticism to examine the ideological forces at work in our pedagogies and our institutional sites.